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PROGRAM All Things Considered

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SUBJECT U.S./Central American Policy

NOAH ADAMS: Historically, American policy toward the five Central American nations (Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) has been anything but diplomatically routine. The United States has alternately ignored and invaded, assisted and undermined those countries.

This year Central America is a topic hotly debated in Congress and a factor in the presidential campaign.

NPR's foreign affairs correspondent Bill Buzenberg has this report on U.S. Central American policy since the days of the Cuban revolution, 25 years ago.

BILL BUZENBERG: North Americans woke up New Year's Day 1959 to news that an old order we supported was giving way to something uncomfortably new, uncomfortably close.

NEWSMAN: The revolution is over. Order has returned to Havana. But enthusiasm and fervor still fill the air following the final ascension to power of the revolutionary regime, now the legally recognized provisional government.

Havana's ovation for Fidel Castro himself has been long deferred. In ever town and hamlet, a cheering welcome greeted the rebel leader.

BUZENBERG: The surprising success of Cuba's revolution profoundly disturbed the Eisenhower and soon-to-follow Kennedy Administrations. Within a year, Castro's nationalizations and growing Soviet ties made it clear the U.S.-Cuba client relationship was dead.

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ABRAHAM LOWENTHAL: That did come as a shock to the United States.

BUZENBERG: Abraham Lowenthal, a Latin American specialist at the University of Southern California, says it was as if part of the United States itself had been lost.

LOWENTHAL: People in Washington and, beyond that, in elite circles in the United States took United States control of the Caribbean for granted, and it particularly took control of Cuba for granted. It was, in some ways, an extension of the United States.

Somebody in the 1930s, I believe, wrote at one point that Cuba was as American as Long Island.

BUZENBERG: Lowenthal says this belief came naturally, that the United States ought to exert control over the Caribbean and Central America. Such control had been assumed for a century.

Indeed, Morris Blackman of the University of South Carolina says this notion of control still exists and goes largely unquestioned by U.S. officials, the press, members of Congress, and the public at large.

MORRIS BLACKMAN: Through Administrations and in the post-World War II period, there has been a fundamental concern, in one way or another, that we control the general character of the regimes, the general destiny of those nations. Not in the sense of controlling all the particularities on the inside, but in the sense of making sure that it fits in with what are conceived as U.S. national interest. And in so doing, there is a division as to what the best way is to control it. But in one form or another, the idea has been that we need to control.

BUZENBERG: The Cuban revolution made American officials extremely worried the United States might lose control throughout the area. Both President's Eisenhower and Kennedy believed they had to pursue policies to prevent future Castros from seizing power.

What they came up with is essentially what the United States has settled on every since. Basically, it's a two-track policy. One track is largely economic, the other mostly military. There would be problems with both.

More about that military track in a moment, but first the economic track.

In the late '50s and early '60s, Central America was in

particularly bad shape. Economies were growing, but everywhere the bulk of the population lived at or near subsistence level. Per capita income was about \$150 a year. Malnutrition and illiteracy were widespread. Fast-growing urban slums coexisted with high-walled palaces of a privileged few.

PRESIDENT JOHN KENNEDY: The hard reality of life in much of Latin America will not be solved simply by complaining about Castro, by blaming all problems on Communism or generals or nationalism. The harsh facts of poverty and social injustice will not yield easily to promises or good will.

BUZENBERG: President Kennedy, two months after taking office, redoubled Eisenhower's economic track and called his effort the Alliance for Progress.

PRESIDENT KENNEDY: The task we have set ourselves in the Alliance for Progress, the development of an entire continent, is a far greater task than any we have ever undertaken in our history. It will require difficult and painful labor over a long period of time.

BUZENBERG: The President called for channeling \$100 billion into Latin America over 10 years. Most of that money was earmarked for South America, where it did stimulate overall economic growth. Gross national products also grew impressively throughout the '60s in Central America.

Harvard-trained economist Jorge Sol, a Salvadoran, was in charge of the Alliance effort at the Organization of American States. He says, in some ways, life did get a little better there.

JORGE SOL: Life expectancy, for instance. Infant mortality went down. Some of the health services were improved. Literacy rates increased. Attendance to primary schools increased.

BUZENBERG: But Jorge Sol says there were problems with the Alliance in Central America. Except for democratic Costa Rica, governments did not aim their development efforts at the poor. Instead, most of the Alliance-supported projects benefited wealthy elites, those people closest to the dictatorships in power. Consequently, and because of high population growth, Jorge Sol says there were actually twice as many impoverished people in Central America by 1980 than before the Alliance began.

SOL: The end result of this period of the Alliance and the common market is that poverty grew in Central America. In human terms, it means that out of 20 million Central Americans, more than 13 million don't have enough to cover their minimum essential needs.

BUZENBERG: So the U.S. economic track, exemplified by the Alliance for Progress, failed for most people in Central America. Worse, expectations it generated actually fueled frustration and discontent.

On the second U.S. policy track, the military approach, a similar disturbing development occurred. American arms and counterinsurgency training were to go hand-in-hand with economic aid, to professionalize various military establishments and contribute to progress and democratic reform. In practice, however, military assistance went to those who sought to repress internal dissent and quash any calls for change.

Walter LeFaber (?), who teaches Latin American history at Cornell University, says, in retrospect, it was naive to expect Central American military establishments to be truly interested in developing and democratizing their societies.

WALTER LEFABER: I think the thing that we have to understand about Central American militaries is that the military has always been loyal first to its own institution, not to the national welfare. The fact of the matter is that when you create a large institutionalized military in this area -- that is, a military which controls the means of violence in that society --that you're really letting loose a Frankenstein monster. And until the military can evolve to the point where it has some sense of the national interest and some sense of democratic responsibility, I think it's misguided to think that by putting more money in the Central American military, that we're going to democratize and quiet the area.

BUZENBERG: American arms and ammunition didn't quiet the area or change military behavior. Instead, American involvement with Central American militaries accelerated revolutionary activity as oppression was stepped up.

So, under this two-track approach, despite the expenditure of two billion dollars in economic aid and nearly 500 million dollars in military aid since 1962, Central America today is worse off, in many ways, with more poverty and more guerrillas.

During the Vietnam War, in the late '60s and early '70s, American attention turned away from Latin America, and it returned only with the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua in 1979. Once again, American policymakers began pursuing two policy tracks to prevent further revolutions and retain some measure of American control. American economic and military aid to Honduras and El Salvador have increased sixteen-fold in the last five years.

With the United States more involved in the region than ever before, and some fearing direct American intervention, President Reagan moved last year to name a high-level national bipartisan commission on Central America to create a consensus behind his two-track policy approach. There were echoes of the past as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger announced the commission's findings in January.

HENRY KISSINGER: The basic argument of the report is this: that there is a crisis in Central America, that the crisis is acute and requires urgent attention. And in an area so close to our borders and of such consequence for our future, it should be dealt with on a nonpartisan or bipartisan basis.

BUZENBERG: Essentially, the commission recommended more economic assistance and enough military aid to maintain stability.

But to historian Walter LeFaber, that sounded like an unpromising replay of what the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson Administrations tried to do.

LEFABER: The Kissinger Commission has essentially recommended another Alliance for Progress for Central America. And it seems to me that the commission is very shortsighted in thinking that anything like the Alliance or anything like and \$8 billion development program -- and that's what the Kissinger Commission is talking about, putting \$8 billion of American taxpayers' money into Central America -- is going to do anything else except create all of the problems and the contradictions that the original Alliance did.

BUZENBERG: Again, Abe Lowenthal, professor of international relations at USC.

LOWENTHAL: The approach of the Kissinger Report towards Central America, when it comes to the relations of economic and military assistance, is like applying leeches and transfusions at the same time in dealing with a critically ill patient, a kind of one remedy which has the effect of undermining the effect of the other remedy.

BUZENBERG: William D. Rogers is one of the few people who worked on both the Alliance for Progress -- he was deputy coordinator -- and the Kissinger Commission -- he was special counsel. Rogers has also served as Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. He says the Kissinger Commission approach can have some beneficial effects, if fully implemented. But he questions just how much the United States can really do.

WILLIAM D. ROGERS: I think it's paradoxical that both

the liberals and the conservatives have this notion that the United States has a much longer lever than it really does. This is something that brings both the right and the left together. And it is an illusion, and a very dangerous one, and one that has led to a large part of the problems that we have in Central America, this notion that Central America is a kind of backyard that we can control.

It is, in very large part, false. The developments in those countries are beyond, in very large measure beyond, our effective management. And it's high time, I think, that this country came to realize the realities of that fact.

BUZENBERG: There may have been a time -- say, in Teddy Roosevelt's day, at the turn of the century -- when the United States, which intervened 20 times in 22 years with U.S. troops, could still wield effective control in Central America at a reasonable cost. But that time is past for today's more complex Central American societies.

If the history of the last 25 years is correct, the United States can try to influence the region's governments. But if those governments are not willing to implement reforms and push for change, and if the United States is not willing to abandon such governments, then our two-track approach will lead to ineffective economic efforts and an increasingly costly military policy, in which the United States becomes beholden to governments that are likely to lose.

That leaves the United States with only the power to destroy, not to create and fashion a future to our liking.